

An non varia
Inaugural Dissertation on
Surgical Life
For
The degree of Doctor of Medicine
in
The University of Pennsylvania

By John Purle of Pennsylvania

"It is for want of experience that men form imperfect ideas of matter, of its properties, of its combination, its force, of its manner of action of the energy which it is from its essence, and of course the whole universe comes to them but a world of illusions"

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aut populus ignota nobis sciet
Seneca

Of all the Phenomena of nature those of life
are truly the most perplexingly astonishing, the most darkly
mysterious - The mind in contemplating the fabric
which it governs and directs, is confounded in the intricacy
of its mechanism, and is forced to acknowledge, that
human thought is indeed far too narrow to comprehend
that wisdom and power which gave it existence -

• Mysterious and wonderful as the frame of living
man truly is, Philosophy has advanced not a little
in the development of its nature -

Life, its cause and its essence, has been a theme
of speculation to many, and the most renowned Physi-
cians in all ages have had a belief that an accurate
knowledge of Life's Nature is the first and most
fundamental principle in the science of Medicine.
There is no doubt, that from confused and erroneous ideas
on this subject many contradictory and absurd theories
in Medicine have had their origin - There is indeed
no science cultivated by man, which has so many
opposing opinions and visionary theories blended with
established truths, as the science of Medicine; and
hence it has often been unjustly stigmatised, as a science
intrinsically vague and conjectural -

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This seeming uncertainty of our science is not real; it is determinate and invariable in its principles; and tho' its fair and substantial fabric be sailed with the drops of speculation, we cannot therefore deny the elegance and firmness of its foundation —

Had medical Philosophers reasoned on the Phenomena of animate nature, by the sure guide of reasonable induction, many of the bewildering cobwebs of error and illusion, which sophistry and dreaming ingenuity have woven would in all probability never have existed in our science, to mislead the mind —

Cullen appears to have been the first, who thought correctly on the nature of life, "The human body" said the D^r, is not an automation or self-moving machine, but is kept alive and in motion by the constant action of stimuli upon it" * But tho' Dr Cullen had this confessed yet correct view of this truly sublime doctrine of the ~~force~~ nature of life; yet he, perhaps not clearly seeing the elegance and truth of the idea abandoned it again for his favorite and more familiar Vital Medecatrix Nature — Thus abandoned and rejected by its father the embryo doctrine of the "forced state" of animal life, was afterwards fostered and expanded by the great Drs Rush and Brown into a system of principles, at once regular, extensive, sublime and correct — a doctrine which must last while correct reasoning and sound principles in science, are admired —

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life is, still by a strange infatuation for mysterious agents in the explication of mysterious phenomena the belief in the existence of a self-existing vital principle is cherished by men of the highest rank in our Profession -

At present therefore, the most prevalent opinions on this subject are 1st That the Phenomena of life depend upon the agency of a principle which in its own nature is vital - and 2^{dly} That life is the result of physical necessity; or in other words that the phenomena of life necessarily follow the action of stimuli upon peculiarly modified Matter, which in its own nature and independent of extrinsic causes is inanimate - Which of all these opinions is true, some good may know, we content ourselves with enquiring which is the most probable -

The principle of animation, which has received various and fanciful names, is supposed by those who believe in its reality, to be that power, by the energy of which dead matter is converted into living systems, and not being cognizable by the senses, as immaterial, in other words as spiritual -

But, indeed, tho' there are many who believe in the agency of such a principle, who assert the independence of its existence; nay even the intelligence of its nature; who nevertheless, will not call it spirit, as if the name could add absurdity to the idea -

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Be its name what it may; we do not wish to combat words; but we refuse to believe in the terrene existence of any such being, which enjoys independent eternity—

As we cannot see any difference between the characters ascribed to the Physicists' ~~terrene~~ principle, and the Metaphysicians' Spirit, we shall consider them hereafter as synonymous under the term of Spirit.

And as the establishment of the soundness of a doctrine depends as much upon showing the invalidity and falsity of opposing opinions, as upon arguments for its own substantiation, a few pages upon the probability or improbability of the existence of Spirit can not be irrelevant—

Should it appear upon examination, that ~~that~~ these beings have, indeed, no real existence, that they are the mere dreams of fancy, should reason and common sense incline to scepticism, that doctrine of animal life, which has for its basis, the existence of such ~~an~~ being, must be rejected as visionary and false— Spirit has long been the common solver of all inexplicable phenomena, but in referring us to ~~the~~ agency ^{of this supposititious cause,} for the appearances of things, ~~they~~ Men, have but pushed us farther into the depths of darkness, and have but rolled mountains in the room of bibles— Great and many are the errors, which this doctrine has engendered in the world; the mind lured astray by the illusory shimmer (Spirit) prevented from turning its attention to matter, its laws, and its modifications, has filled the universe with phantoms for realities, dreams for causes—

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will our claim an acquaintance with the spiritual in proportion to their ignorance with the Material world; and unless it may safely be affirmed, that untutored reason and philosophy shall have dispelled every cloud of dubious mystery from the face of nature, untill the eternal & yet latent laws of matter are finally developed we may expect to see the world teem with the exploits of ghosts, specters and hob-goblins -

Spiritualists have indeed a "Name" for their creed but they give it neither "a local habitation" nor a "shape" - Spirit say they, is a being, simple, immaterial, invisible, indivisible and unextended; that is a being possessing every negative property of real existence! - let us examine it according to this official definition -

Dr. Darwin in the 1st vol. of Zoon: has given us a most satisfactory and conclusive argument against the existence or agency of spirit upon Matter. "If," says he, the "spirit of animation was always necessarily penetrable, it could not influence or be influenced by the solidity of common Matter, they would exist together, but could not exclude each other from the part or space where they exist, that is they could not communicate motion to each other - No two things can influence or affect each other unless they have not some property ^{common} to them both; for to influence or affect another body is to give or to communicate some property to it that it had not before; but how can one body give that to another which it does not possess itself?"

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These words imply that they must agree in having
the power or faculty of possessing some common
property - Thus if one body moves another from
the part or space that it occupies it must have the
power of occupying that space itself. This is
surely a very conclusive argument against the going
of an immaterial principle on this earth. But Darwin
who did not advance it as such, and who did not
mist it to be considered so, shewed this, his own
argument, by very pertinently giving his spirits the
wonderful and almost omnipotent immunity of
assuming the property of solidity, or discharging themselves
of it, as occasion might require! - and thus he
conceded a flat absurdity, because he wished to
believe in spirit, yet was aware that a being void
of every property of matter could not exert any influ-
ence upon matter - This however is not the only
instance in which Darwins imagination got the
better of his reason; and we are forced, notwithstanding
his explanation, to conclude from the above, that Spirit
possessing no property in common with matter can have
no residence "here below," since there could be no use
for beings in a place where they could neither influence
or be influenced - Besides spirit being an unextended
entity, can have no contact with the material world, and
of consequence cannot affect or be affected by it -

Philosophers under the firm persuasion that matter
incapable of thought, have always resorted to the

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intellectual part of our nature, as a proof of the
 existence of an immaterial principle — True, we
 grant, that common matter does never think, but were
 I asked to point ^{out some} thinking matter, I would point it in a
 human being, who is indeed but a lump of feeling
 and thinking matter — But even granting the existence
 of spirit, which otherwise to be, invisible, indivisible and un-
 extended, let us see whether it is possible that such an
 immaterial being could think. — I presume there is
 no one who will not admit, that thought, in whatever
 part it may be performed, is always accompanied with
 motion of some kind in the substance in which
 which does think — For unless ~~that~~ ^{it is} proven, which I
 think ~~impossible to prove~~ ^{no one will under-}
 take to do, that an effect may take place without mo-
 tion, this must be granted — Now motion considered
 relatively to the body which moves, can be but of two
 kinds, viz. the whole body either moves from ~~its~~ ^{its present}
situation without any motion of its own parts; or
 the body remains fixed and its own parts move, in
 a change of situation — but it is evident that thought could not
 be the effect of any thing ^{moving} merely forwards in a direct line,
 without some internal motion; and therefore if it does
 proceed from the force of spirit must be the result of
 its own and internal motion — But how can there be
 any motion at the parts of things which is unextended?
 unless indeed we suppose an unextended being has parts.

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The adoption of statements that reason cannot assent to, and leads to eternal error, and is subversive of the minds proper towards truth and knowledge —

Opinions are too often inherited, as it were by inheritance, and defended, only because they were the sanctioned by our forefathers in science; and it seems as if men did not even dare to investigate for themselves, for few reason men discern to them that their long cherished opinions are indeed but dreams — Much, however may be expected from the spirit of free enquiry which appears at present to prevail in the Philosophic world. The young enquiring mind is happily permitted to examine for himself and to weigh in the balance of unbiased reason the opinions of ~~our~~ his forefathers; he is permitted to reject or to adopt whatever his reason anticipates or cancels. He is no longer bound down, particularly in this our blind country, to follow ~~the~~ ^{scrupulously} ~~the~~ ^{the} opinions of others or to refrain by dissenting from the orthodoxy of the schools, to incur their representatives inquisitorial damnations of Heresy —

Religion has even been enlisted into the Phalanx of immaterial disputes, and a quotation from St. Paul, from Daniel &c. has in their opinion been thrown a volume of substantial reasoning — Thus both ~~truth~~ ^{has been} ~~truth~~ ^{has been} clouded, and the simple and plain arguments of reason and common sense have been swept into the kennels of inconsequence by the mystical notions of superstition, prejudice & fanaticism —

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The disability in the existence of being, of which we
 know nothing, nay of which we can even form no
 idea, is looked upon by the generality of mankind
 as atheism; but whatever the credulity of Ignorance
 may claim, we with the most hearty sincerity declare
 our belief in the immortality of ^{the} soul; for

"Immortal matter braves the transient storm
 "Mounts from the wreck unchanging, lost in form,
 Panmixia

When we, after having been driven to and fro for
 ages in the ocean of mysterious uncertainties, in con-
 sequence, were at last happily conducted to the port of
 truth, by the light kindled by Drs Boissier & Rutherford
 They first dared to reason in medicine, as Boissier
 did in Physics, and to consider the ghostly opinions of
 their predecessors and contemporaries in Medicine, as illu-
 sion phantoms, ~~that~~ fitted only to confound reason
 humiliate the understanding and darken science with
 error and superstition —

According to the doctrine established by these
 two illustrious philosophers, "Man and other animals
 suffer from themselves in their actual state, or from any other
 emanations in the ether, or the properties of the
 by external agents, as well as by certain ~~particular~~ peculiar
 to themselves in such a manner that the

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phenomena peculiar to the living state are to be accounted for - Thus then, according to this doctrine, life is a necessary result of the action of stimuli on Matter, ^{or} ~~in~~ ^{the} modification of its substance, to take on living action -

But it may, perhaps be said, that this capacity of which we speak, is in reality nothing more or less than the vital principle of some Physicists; but I must be bound to that a capacity, and a principle that has acts are two very different things, the one is passive and the other active -

Asper has a capacity for life, but this is merely a quality which the ~~material~~ matter of the seed has assumed in consequence of a previous ^{external} modification, and which consequently of stimuli will never ^{convert} the seed into a plant -

The experiments made by the celebrated Spallanzani on the Ova of Frogs, afford us the most elegant proofs of the truth of this doctrine of Matter &c - He took a string of ova as they came from the female frog, part of which he touched with diluted semen from a male frog; and the other part with distilled water - The consequence was that the part of the string of ova which received the stimulus of the male semen produced tadpoles; while the other part which was not stimulated by its appropriate stimulus ^{remained} infertile - In this case ^{must} ~~ask~~ ^{we} ~~any one~~ ^{not} ~~ask~~ ^{ask} how these tadpoles forced into animal existence by the stimulus of the male semen? Did not Spallanzani produce

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 to force them into a living state? he shoot was their living
 not truly a "forced state" of being? —

There are many other facts which convince of
 the truth of the common doctrine of life;
 and among others the production of the chick in an
 egg is a familiar one — An egg may be kept a
 very long time in a common temperature without
 the production of a chick; but if the egg be placed
 in a warm water and then, because, the the embryo chick has
 a capacity for life, yet for want of a proper st-
 imulus to put that capacity into action, it remains
 a mere caputated substance — If however
 this egg were placed into a temperature of a
 certain degree, the caputated one would become
 a living chick — There then are those the
 production of a living being merely by the action
 of heat upon a body so organized as to possess
 the capacity to life — the heat acts purely as an
 instrument — It has been said that if life were
 a forced state of being, its duration would be pro-
 longed to any extent — This however, is an objection
 as it is not a very fertile one — but consider that
 the same causes, which, those who make this objection
 say, excite the vital principle from the body, is
 sufficient to destroy the vital capacity of the body —
 If there is a vital principle or power, as we
 find in the seeds of vegetables, why do they not

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than do or germinate? Why do the ^{the} remain in the same
passive condition, so long as a proper stimulus is not
applied to them? But granting the existence of an indepen-
dent principle of life; must it have a stimulus to raise
it into action? We see it must - and will it then still
be said that life is not a "forced state" —

It has been asked by some, where does this capacity to
life, this "excitability", of which we have been speaking, come
from? We see, that the various changes of combinations
which the original elements of the world have assumed
since the creation of time, has produced millions of
contrary bodies, differing in their laws, their qualities &
their properties — Chemistry assists us in this de-
partment of Philosophy; we are instructed by that
science, that bodies tho' formed from the same element
of matter assume very different qualities &c.

Seeing this, is it irrational to suppose, may is it
not the dictates of reason to assert, that the elements
of matter may so arrange themselves, as to give to a
body, the quality of being made active ^{or} of being, when
acted upon, by congenial stimuli? —

If, say the opponents to this doctrine, it were
true that the mere fortuitous concurrence of the
of the elementary parts of matter could form an
animated aggregate, why do we not see
men and other animals spring up in the air water
earth &c. — It is, however, not said, that any Mes-
sification of matter ~~does~~ or can produce a truly

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living being; ~~but we will not enter into the~~
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but, from reasoning and from observation, we think
it is more than probable that ^{independent} ~~may~~ God ^{does} produce
such a change in common matter, as to give it
a capacity of being made living, when acted upon
by extrinsic and appropriate causes —

This is truly a grand and comprehensive
view of existence! Nothing can be more greatly
evidence of the goodness, the power, and the wisdom
of the First Cause, than that view of nature which
makes him, the Cause of causes, giving laws to
Matter, by which alone the various objects in
the Universal World are produced —

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